

"Gifts of Christmas"

Matt. 2:1-12

December 2016

Turn with me to Matthew chapter 2. Here we find the visit of the wise men and the gifts that they brought to Jesus. Matt. 2:1-12:

Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, saying, "Where is He who has been born King of the Jews? For we have seen His star in the East and have come to worship Him." When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him. And when he had gathered all the chief priests and scribes of the people together, he inquired of them where the Christ was to be born.

So they said to him, "In Bethlehem of Judea, for thus it is written by the prophet: 'But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, Are not the least among the rulers of Judah; For out of you shall come a Ruler Who will shepherd My people Israel.'"

Then Herod, when he had secretly called the wise men, determined from them what time the star appeared. And he sent them to Bethlehem and said, "Go and search carefully for the young Child, and when you have found Him, bring back word to me, that I may come and worship Him also."

When they heard the king, they departed; and behold, the star which they had seen in the East went before them, till it came and stood over where the young Child was. When they saw the star, they rejoiced with exceedingly great joy. And when they had come into the house, they saw the young Child with Mary His mother, and fell down and worshiped Him. And when they had opened their treasures, they presented gifts to Him: gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Then, being divinely warned in a dream that they should not return to Herod, they departed for their own country another way. (Matt. 2:1-12 NKJV) Prayer

When we think of Christmas, we think of gifts. But now gift buying has gone to a whole new level of craziness. All I have to do is say two words: "Black Friday." How many of you camped out overnight or got up at "Zero Dark Thirty" to join the madness? Was it really worth it? And yet gifts are a part of the DNA of Christmas. My wife tells me that there is a line from *Little Women* that runs: "Christmas won't be Christmas without any presents." And that is true, isn't it?

But seriously, you also have to prioritize your gift giving. I mean, you don't put the same amount of care in choosing an anonymous gift for an office party that you put into a gift for your mom, right? And you would think that the more important that a person is to you, the more care you put into their gift. Think about God's gift to you: "God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son..." (John 3:16). Paul says He is a gift too wonderful for words. Paul was not only brilliant, he was eloquent, but when it came to the gift God gave us all in the person of the Lord Jesus, he just had to throw up his hands and say: "Thanks be to God for His indescribable gift," a gift too wonderful for words (2 Cor. 9:15). And I could preach a series of sermons on that alone. But I want us to think this morning about our gifts to God. Have you thought about

the gift that you are going to give to the Lord as we conclude the Christmas season and head into the New Year? Since He gave you His best, shouldn't you give Him your very best?

Well I think we can learn a valuable lesson from these wise men, and my outline this morning comes from Dr. Adrian Rogers, the great pastor at Bellvue Baptist who died several years ago. So first of all let's talk about who these wise men were and why they came.

I. THE WISE MEN: WHY THEY CAME

We all know the story, and we know that they were not Kings as in: "We three Kings of Orient are..." They were wise men, or *Magi*, a kind of priestly class of philosopher-astrologers. We know that they were not there at the birth of Jesus, as many Christmas plays and manger scenes would have it--they came months later, based on the Greek word for "child" in v 8-9 and the time it would take to travel from Persia to Jerusalem. We know that they brought at least 3 kinds of gifts: gold, frankincense, and myrrh. We know what they brought & why they came: to worship the new King.

So there's a lot that we do know about these wise men, but there's a lot we do not know. For example, we're not certain that there were only 3 wise men, we're just told about 3 kinds of gifts. We're not certain which country these men came from, the Bible simply says that they came from the East. It is likely that they came from Persia, which is modern day Iraq/Iran, where they would have had some knowledge of Daniel, the OT prophet who was exiled in Babylon, where he served as an advisor and co-regent under the Kings of the Babylonian and Persian Empires.

A. Prophecies they may have heard: In fact, after Daniel interpreted King Nebuchadnezzar's dream, Dan. 2:48 tells us that the king made Daniel ruler over the entire province of Babylon and placed him in charge of all its wise men. So Daniel would have taught the wise men the prophecies that the Lord gave him. And it was Daniel who was given a prophecy concerning a coming Messiah, a ruler in Dan. 9:25, a prophecy that looked forward to Jesus Christ.

Then you have the prophecy of Balaam in Numbers 24:17. Balaam was an internationally known seer who came from the valley of the Euphrates, which became Babylonia/Persia – now Iraq/Iran, so chances are the Magi would have been privy to at least these two prophecies. And like Daniel's prophecy, Balaam's prophecy also spoke of a coming ruler, and it says: "A star will come out of Jacob, a scepter will rise out of Israel." So there are the *prophecies* they may have heard, but then there is the *phenomenon* they saw. They saw a star.

B. Phenomenon they saw: And in the prophecy, there is a connection between a star and a coming ruler, and the Magi made that connection. Apparently, there was also a popular belief cited by several ancient historians that stars, comets, and other astral phenomena heralded the births of people destined for greatness (Pliny, *N.H.* II, 25, 93ff; Lucian 1, 529; Tacitus, *Annals*, XIV, 22, Suetonius, *Nero*, 36). And these Magi apparently held this view as well (v 1--his star). On top of that, several Roman historians record that there was a lot of speculation during that time about a world ruler who would come from an eastern province, which could include Judea (Josephus, *War*, 6.132f; Suetonius, *Vespasian*, 4.5; Tacitus, *Histories*, 8.13.4f).

So these wise men figured that this "star" would lead them to the One of whom the prophets spoke. Well what about this star, which was first mentioned in Balaam's prophecy, that led them to Jesus? There's a lot of debate about it. Some people think it was a natural occurrence. For example, back in 7 BC the planets Saturn and Jupiter converged and shone as one light over a period of several months. Others think it was a super nova. But I personally don't think it was a super nova, or a convergence of planets, or any other named star. I believe that this was a supernatural manifestation of the glory of God in the heavens, the same glory passed by Moses in the cleft of the rock, the same glory that filled the Tabernacle and the first Temple, and the same glory that shone round about the shepherds in Luke 2. This heavenly glory appeared (v 7) and it moved (v 9). So this so-called "star" led these wise men directly to Jesus.

Well there are some things that we do not know, but there are some things that we do know, and they are wonderful things. And we're going to talk about some of them this morning. First of all, notice that these men were called wise men, and we can certainly judge them as wise because they sought out Jesus to worship Him. I don't think there's a one of us who hasn't heard the slogan: "Wise men still seek Him." So the prophecies they heard, the phenomena they saw, and thirdly:

C. Perseverance they showed: It wasn't easy, it wasn't convenient for them to worship Him. They had a lot of obstacles to overcome.

1. Distance: For example, there was the obstacle of distance. As we read in v 1, they came from the east, and if they did come from the kingdom of Persia, which is modern Iraq, to Jerusalem, even today, that would be a long trip. But these are men who have come a great distance, if they came from Babylon, over 700 miles (DC to Atlanta is a little less).

2. Difficulty: Not only was there the obstacle of distance, there was the obstacle of difficulty. I want to remind you that in that time there were no planes, trains, and automobiles. They were restricted to horses, camels, donkeys, and what my dad used to call the "ankle express." Think about braving the elements and getting food in a day when there were no McDonalds, no Wendy's. Think about traveling 700 miles like that, and you get some idea of the difficulty they faced.

3. Danger: But not only was there distance and difficulty, there was danger. Not just danger on the highway, but danger from Herod. Herod was a suspicious, paranoid, murderer. If he even got the idea that you were a threat to his throne, he would have you killed. In fact, history tells us that he murdered a number of his family members because he thought they were rivals plotting to take over. And we read later in this chapter where he ended up ordering the death of the male children two years old and younger in Bethlehem and the surrounding region (2:16-17). He was a hateful, murderous old man. So these wise men were in danger. They had to overcome all kinds of obstacles, but Distance, Difficulty, and Danger notwithstanding, they pressed on in their quest to worship Jesus.

Compare that to our attitude toward worship today. Many people have a take it or leave it attitude toward worshipping the Lord Jesus. They worship when it's convenient and fits or schedule. They who worship when there's not anything more important or more pressing or

more exciting to do. I mean if the weather is not right, or company comes in, or if there's something else to do, then they don't seem to be able to make it to worship.

Well these wise men, these Magi were serious. They were driven by one goal, they were obsessed with one objective, they were propelled by one passion, and that was to find Jesus and worship Him. And in spite of distance, difficulty and danger, they came to worship Him. We should too! Well we have talked about why they came – to worship Him, now let's talk about what they brought.

II. THE WISEMEN: WHAT THEY BROUGHT

We all know that when they worshipped the Lord Jesus, they brought Him three special gifts (v 11), and as we will see, they were well chosen and appropriate. You know, it is tough to find the right gifts at Christmas, isn't it? Some people in our lives just take a lot of extra time, thought, effort, and expense when getting just the right gift for them. You try to find something that fits that person's style or their personality or to meet some particular need, and sometimes it's tough. Sometimes, you are just trying to be mean. One year, I bought my mom some oversized underwear and stuffed it in her stocking as a gag. She retaliated the next year with an innocent looking bear, but the sound it makes is not so innocent. She bought me a flatulent bear!

People who don't give appropriate gifts cause Christmas to fall flat. I heard about a guy up in north who gave his wife a set of snow tires for Christmas. I read about another guy who gave his wife a monogrammed chain-saw. Not exactly something that would rev up any romance. But the funniest of all was Erma Bombeck, who said that the worst gift she ever got in her stocking was a Gift Certificate for a Flu Shot. Practical? Yes. Fitting, no.

Seriously, what would you bring a new born King? What would be fitting and appropriate for the Messiah? Well the gifts the wise men chose were especially fitting because they are symbolic of some wonderful truths about Jesus, and tell us what we ought to bring to Jesus this Christmas season. So let's think about what these gifts represent and what they speak of.

A. Gold: His Sovereign Dominion: First, they opened up their treasures and presented to him gold. Now gold is a gift that would be presented to a King. Of course gold was the most precious metal of that day, and in Bible times it was symbolic of royalty. Solomon covered his throne in gold, and we've all seen the elaborate and lavish use of gold in the tombs of the Egyptian kings. Gold was a gift befitting a ruler, a monarch, a king. So when these wise men came into the humble home of Joseph and Mary, and presented to Him gold, what they were saying was: "This child will be a great King." They had apparently studied the ancient prophecies of Daniel, they had followed the star of Balaam's prophecy, and they came asking Herod: "Where is the one who has been born King of the Jews?" and they heard the prophecy of Micah 5:2. So when they brought him gold, they were recognizing His sovereign dominion.

Have you done that this morning? Have you recognized His sovereign dominion, His right to reign and rule and King? The prophecy in Isaiah 9:7 says "Of the increase of His government and peace there shall be no end. He will reign on David's throne and over His kingdom, establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness from that time on and forever." So

this baby that we're talking about is no ordinary baby. He is King of Kings and Lord of Lords. Now the question comes this Christmas, will you offer to the Lord the submission due to Him because He is your King? Its not enough tip your hat, you must bow your knee.

Remember the fad called Tebowing, when Quarterback Tim Tebow was playing for the Bronco's, he would bow in prayer on the sidelines or after a touchdown. There's even a website called Tebowing where people take pictures bowing in the "Tebow Prayer Pose." For the record, I appreciate Tim Tebow because it seems to be genuine and serious, but I think a lot of people just jumped on the bandwagon and some are just mocking. But Tebowing was quite the phenomena, and the proof is that you could even buy the T-Shirt. Well these Wise Men weren't just following a fad, they were serious in their worship of Jesus. When these Wise Men came to see Jesus, they did not cuddle Him, they did not coo at Him, these wise men bowed before Him and recognized Him first of all as a King. Have you done that?

What can I give Him today? I can give Him my wealth and recognize His sovereign dominion over all that I have. He is King of Kings and Lord of Lords; His Kingdom has no end. But as far as your life is concerned, either He is Lord of all or He is not Lord at all. Have you given Him your wealth, and said: "Jesus you are my King and my Lord, I place all that I have under your sovereign dominion?" If so, as you are choosing a Christmas gift for Jesus, let me suggest that you come first with your money. Bring His tithes to the storehouse to support the ministry here, bring an offering to support missions abroad. Bring Him your gold-your best.

B. Frankincense: Supreme Deity: Well what about the frankincense? What was it, and what did it symbolize? Frankincense was a very expensive incense made from the resin of a certain tree, which when cut, would bleed an amber colored oil. This was then caught and dried, and when it was warmed or burned, it would release a fragrant scent that would fill the room with the most delicious aroma. What did it symbolize? If the gold symbolizes His sovereign dominion, then frankincense symbolizes His supreme deity. You say: "I don't see anything here about deity, it just says: "Frankincense." Well if gold was a gift befitting a king, frankincense was a gift befitting Almighty God. Listen to Exodus 30:34-37, and you'll see that frankincense was not an afterthought, it was extremely significant:

And the LORD said to Moses: "Take...pure frankincense with these sweet spices; there shall be equal amounts of each. You shall make of these an incense, a compound according to the art of the perfumer, salted, pure, and holy. And you shall beat some of it very fine, and put some of it before the Testimony in the tabernacle of meeting where I will meet with you. It shall be most holy to you. But as for the incense which you shall make, you shall not make any for yourselves, according to its composition. It shall be to you holy for the LORD. (Exodus 30:34-37)

Notice it is sacred; it is holy to the Lord! God is saying that frankincense is the basic ingredient of the holy incense, it is most holy, and if you burn it, it is only to be burned when you worship me! It was to be given to God in worship! What then did this gift symbolize? The gold speaks of His sovereign dominion, but the frankincense speaks of His supreme deity.

Jesus Christ is God of very God. And these wise men recognized this not only by what they gave but by what they did. Notice their purpose in v 2 and its fulfillment in v 11 that they bowed

down and they worshipped Jesus. Look at it. The Greek word means to prostrate yourself, bow and fall on your face. These wise men followed the star to this humble home, came in, and when they saw the child, they bowed down and worshipped Him. You might say, "Well they were just politely recognizing him as the new born King." Question: Why didn't they bow before King Herod and worship him? Oh no, they saw more than a King in this child. The Bible says: "Thou shalt worship the Lord Thy God and Him only." Don't miss it: Him only! HIM ONLY!" So folks, if Jesus is not God, this was the ultimate blasphemy. No one should worship anything or anyone but God alone! They worshiped Him. Why? Because this child was God!

Again, the prophecy in Isaiah 9 makes it clear. Verse 6 says: "For unto us a child is born (humanity) and unto us a son is given (deity), and the government shall be upon his shoulders (that's his sovereign dominion, that's the gold)," but then it goes on to say: "And His name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, the Mighty God..." that speaks of His supreme deity, that's the frankincense. So He was not only born a King, this child was God in human flesh! And the gift of frankincense was something to be used in the worship of God and God alone. Oh how wise were these wise men! Now how much of this they really understood, I don't know, but I do know that God led them to bring these gifts, and God made sure these gifts were recorded in Scripture, and therefore they are significant for us today.

What shall I bring the Lord Jesus? Because of His sovereign dominion, I give Him my wealth. Because of His supreme deity, I give Him my worship. My worship! Seems like Christmas has come and gone in a flash, and if we are not careful, we'll spend most of our time on our *feet* not much time on your *face* in worship. You know what I mean - busy finding gifts, trimming trees, hanging lights, wrapping presents, and moving from one party to another. Nothing wrong with all that, but there's something awfully wrong if you leave out worship. The purpose of the Christmas season is to worship Him! So don't spend all your time on your feet, fall down on your face before Him! For He is God!

C. Myrrh: Sacrificial Death: Very quickly, we come to the third gift, the gift of myrrh. What is myrrh, and what did it symbolize? Like frankincense, myrrh came from a certain tree, and this oily substance was captured in a little square collecting basin where it hardened into a block, and it was so expensive in raw form that they would scrape off the shavings for its use. And among other things it was used as a perfume, as a pain killer, and for the embalming of the dead. Can you imagine bringing a child something that would be used to embalm the dead?

So why myrrh? Because not only did their gifts recognize His sovereign dominion and His supreme deity, but the gift of myrrh speaks of His sacrificial death. And these wise men may have had some grasp of this, if they indeed knew Daniel's prophecy, because the passage in Dan. 9 not only spoke of a coming Messiah, a ruler, but that this ruler would be cut off, He would be killed, and then later the rebuilt city of Jerusalem and the Temple would be destroyed--a prophecy given hundreds of years before these events took place. So the gift of myrrh spoke of the fact that the Christ child was born to die!

In fact, listen to Mark 15:23. Here Jesus is about to be nailed to the cross, and the Bible says that "They offered Him wine mixed with myrrh, but he did not take it. And they crucified Him..." Again, wine and myrrh mixed together was an ancient pain killer, but Jesus refused to taste it,

that He might taste suffering and death for every man on that cross. After His death, in John 19:38, we find that Joseph of Arimathea, asked Pilate for the body of Jesus, and was granted permission to take it. Listen to what it says in 39-40: "And Nicodemus, who at first came to Jesus by night, also came, bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about a hundred pounds. Then they took the body of Jesus, and bound it in strips of linen with the spices, as the custom of the Jews is to bury."

So we read that Joseph and Nicodemus took a mixture of myrrh and aloes and embalmed the body of the Lord Jesus according to Jewish burial customs. It was their custom to use myrrh! And these wise men brought myrrh to the Christ child! Again, I don't know whether these wise men understood all of this or not, but I know that the Holy Spirit knew it. This gift was not given by accident! God arranged it to tell us about His Son, about who He is and what He came to do. And He came to die! Myrrh spoke of His sacrificial death.

Did you know that the early church didn't celebrate the birth of Jesus. Now let me be quick to say that its not wrong to do it, I mean, we find here and in Luke that His birth was celebrated not only on earth but in heaven itself. Not only did the star shine but the angelic host sang: "Glory to God in the Highest!" The birth of Jesus is very important, but we have no record that the early church was told to commemorate His birth. We are told to commemorate what? His death. His death! The real Christmas Tree is in 1 Peter 2:24: "He himself bore our sins in His body on the tree!" That tree was a rugged cross. Not decorated with ornaments, but stained with the blood of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Christ's coming was one of the two greatest acts of God's grace in all of history. He exchanged a robe of light-robe of flesh, the glory of heaven for a smelly stable, a lofty throne for a lowly manger. But when we think of the Lord Jesus we not only need to think of a cradle, but of a cross. And these wise men gave Him a gift of myrrh looking to the day that He would die upon "the tree." No wonder Heaven's choir came down to sing when Heaven's King came down to save! That was His mission. He was born to die for the sins of the world!

You say: "What shall I give Jesus this Christmas season?"

1. Bring Him gold! Recognize His sovereign dominion by giving Him of your wealth! He is the King of Kings and Lord of Lords. He owns it all, but He only requires a tithe. Think about it. He let's you keep as much as 90%, and you only give a minimum of 10%. Bring Him gold!
2. Bring Him frankincense! Recognize His supreme deity by giving Him your worship! The shepherds bowed, the wise men bowed, the angels bowed. We should bow. As the carol says: "O come let us adore Him." Bring Him frankincense!
3. Then finally, bring Him myrrh! That speaks of His sacrificial death, and how can we respond? We can recognize His sacrificial death by giving Him your witness. Let the world know that He died for you! Bring Him myrrh!

Remember, it is the cross, not the cradle, but the cross that's the central symbol of Christianity. But thank God for the cradle, the cross, and the crown. Go tell it on the mountain, not only that

Jesus Christ is born, but that He died a sacrificial death for the sins of mankind, that 3 days later God raised Him from the dead, and that one blessed day, glorious day, He's coming again. So our wealth, our worship, and our witness belong to Jesus this Christmas season.

Prayer: Father, we thank you for the example of the wise men. Help us to follow in their footsteps of bringing our gifts to the Lord Jesus. May we give you our wealth to further the work of your kingdom, our worship that is a sweet smelling aroma before your throne, our witness to your Son's death, resurrection and his power to save, to bring hope and joy. But most of all, help us to give the gift of ourselves, as Paul says "a living sacrifice." We thank you for Jesus, the gift too wonderful for words, and it is in His name we pray, Amen.

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